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BOOK REVIEWS

The Iliad of Homer. Translated into English Hexameter Verse by PRENTISS CUMMINGS. An Abridgement Which Includes All the Main Story and the Most Celebrated Passages. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1912. Pp. xlv+497. \$1.00.

Year after year the Homeric sphinx continues to claim her victims, and bold adventurers approach her rock, undeterred by the fate of their predecessors, to try their luck at one of her two riddles—the unanswerable Homeric question (“that philological scandal” Professor Shorey has well called it) and the alluring, baffling, insoluble problem of translation. Mr. Prentiss Cummings, a bold adventurer indeed, has essayed the solution of both enigmas. This latest American version of the *Iliad* is a reprint in one volume of the two-volume edition of 1910, omitting the appendix. In his carelessly written introduction Mr. Cummings rashly offers one more theory as to the origin and growth of the *Iliad*, an inquiry that lies far outside of the province of a translator, as Matthew Arnold pointed out. His guess at the Homeric question might have some interest for us, if he had illustrated his theory in his translation and given us his conception of the original Homer’s epic on the Wrath of Achilles, as Fick has done by a German version of his Aeolic *Urmenis*. But Mr. Cummings wants to get in, not only “all the main story,” but also “the most celebrated passages.” Suffice it to say that he holds the opinion that “at least three great authors had a hand in the composition,” and that in his translation he has retained practically everything which he attributes to the first and the second Homer and “the best of the third Homer’s work.” Yet he omits many a famous passage (for instance, all of Book iii); and he has unfortunately neglected to number his lines, and in some cases to indicate even the books of the *Iliad*. He gives, in fact, about half of the *Iliad*. Besides the omissions there are numerous condensations, generally in feeble paraphrase, and occasionally there are tasteless additions, most notable of which is the couplet about Paris (p. 447):

Who, when the goddesses brought for his judgment the apple of Discord,
Gave Aphrodite the prize who promised him Helen, his ruin.

The remarks on English hexameter in the introduction are more judicious and worthy of consideration than those on the composition of the *Iliad*. Unfortunately the translator is far from observing with complete fidelity the principles he has himself laid down. His verse abounds in trochees for spondees and in such forced substitutes for dactyls as “rolling-eyed,” “worst-looking,” “mis-shapen,” “barley-meal,” “high-thundering,” “little girls,” “Prayer-Maidens,” “dishonored,” “short of gold,” “I at least,” etc. It abounds in

words abused to suit the rhythm, in misplaced pauses, and even in hypermetrical lines.

The translator tells us that he has not "adhered consistently to the Greek spelling of certain names of which the Latin form is familiar in English"; and he gives us such inconsistencies as "Aineias," "Olympos," "Phoibos," "Phoenix," "Tuchios," "Poluaimon," side by side with "Hector," "Menelaus," "Teucer," "Meleager," "Phylomedusa"! There are also misspellings, such as "Chaimaira" (p. 83), "Hipoplakion" (p. 96), "Eurimedon" (p. 135), "Pyrlartes" (p. 301), "Amphidimas" (p. 437), "Euristheus" (p. 153), "Delopians" (p. 200).

Mr. Cummings' translation is generally faithful to the meaning of the Greek. His verse is often smooth and readable, there are even occasional felicities; yet the result cannot be called at all successful, for the simple reason that his work is not poetry. The divine fire of the original (*θεσπιδαὲς πῶρ*) has paled and cooled to dull ashes in the process of transition. The same thing is true of most attempts at translating Homer. None but a true poet can perform the Promethean miracle of bringing down celestial flame from its native empyrean; the Titan's task is too great for mere mortals. Rossetti, himself a successful translator, has well said that "the life-blood of rhythmical translation is this commandment—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one." And Mr. Cummings has turned the greatest of Greek poetry into English verse that is often very bad indeed; his translation has certainly far less of poetry in it than the plain prose of Messrs. Lang, Leaf, and Myers. There is space for but a few citations. A fine couplet of almost Shakespearean sentimentousness suffers such treatment as this at his hands:

Lost is that man to tribe, to social usage, and homeless,
Whoso, his people among, promoteth palsying discord (ix. 63 f.).

Other typical examples follow:

Cupbearers wouldn't hold out, and many a decade go thirsty (p. 50).
Leaving their master to roll from the car down side of the car-wheel (p. 73).
Surely my day draweth nigh to be called once more "darling Bright-Eyes" (p. 153).
Thrice he sent forth a yell,—man's head could hold nothing louder (p. 234).
First having gone to a black-water fount and lapped to repletion (p. 291).
Leave life's ultimate threshold my last sights visions of horror (p. 402).
See, that is, if thou carest to look, and such things interest thee (p. 192).
Albeit fearless is Hector and doeth unlimited talking (p. 113).

(This is not only vile English but a gross mistaking of the Greek: the last words should be "insatiate of battle," but the translator has carelessly read *μύθον* for *μύθος*.)

Many a time hath over me swept an impulse to marry,
Settle down, and rejoice in the wealth which Peleus possesseth (p. 194).

Thus ascertaining how Troy feeleth now, this man having fallen,
Whether abandon their high-walled town, or stay and defend it (p. 423).

These lame hexameters the "strong-winged music of Homer"! Yet Mr. Cummings declares that "a translation should be such that the reader will feel that he is reading poetry"!

It is perhaps unreasonable to complain of a translator because he is no poet—poets are generally better occupied than in translating—but when a translator who employs verse expresses himself in a way that would be intolerable even in newspaper prose, it is surely a serious crime. This version abounds in examples of baldly prosaic, colloquial, vulgar, and slovenly diction, and no fidelity to the sense of the original, no occasional felicity of phrase or smoothness of versification can atone for such handling of a noble and beautiful poem. Here are some specimens: "skulk" (as a noun, pp. 99, 112, 134, 189, 458); "panicky" (p. 124); "drooling" (p. 200); "slazy" (p. 51); "the whole of us" (p. 22); "what meaneth thy tears?" (p. 27); "most unhonored of any" (p. 34); "death thou facest, and dare not" (p. 18); "thou foully entreated" (p. 19); "fooled round" (p. 50); "squelching this word-slinging scold" (p. 60); "go right back and sit down" (p. 113); "the Trojans ran every which way"; "many a Trojan and mighty were making assault" (p. 236); "run over to Nestor's" (p. 242); "smashed his head to a jelly" (p. 276); "no great as a warrior"; "right under the nose of the Trojans" (p. 334); "a batch of tripods" (p. 362); "in a pet while playing at jackstones" (p. 437); "the Trojans hanging around in the court"; "ye loafers" (p. 460); "'twould be reprehensible very" (p. 474); "the outfit" (p. 380); "hate which proddeth to quarrel" (p. 349); "Thetis hath talked thee around" (p. 37); "tipping the wink" (p. 179); "the wound quite gurgled with blood" (p. 248); "a need insupportable longer" (p. 242). These are but a few out of scores of examples of bad diction; in fact, it is not too much to say that one can hardly read a dozen consecutive lines on any page of the book without falling into some shocking bathos.

The conclusion of the whole matter is that Mr. Cummings is no Oedipus, and the sphinx's riddle remains unsolved. His failure is like that of innumerable predecessors whose work has been cast into the abyss of oblivion—the failure which Chapman, pioneer of English translators of Homer, so admirably characterized in the case of his own predecessors in Latin, Italian, and French:

They failed to search his deep and treasurous heart;
The cause was, since they wanted the fit key
Of Nature, in their downright strength of Art,
With Poesy to open Poesy.

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Public Education in Germany and in the United States. By L. R. KLEMM.
Boston: Richard C. Badger, 1911. Pp. 350. \$1.50.

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